

FOOD

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Technological improvements in food science open one route to address the possibilities of “posthuman” eating. The science fiction cliché of the meal in a pill offers the hope of nutrition without the bestial messiness of foraging on and then excreting great masses of stuff, and without equally bestial gustatory delights; Adam Roberts’ 2011 novel *By Light Alone* imagines humans spliced with a photosynthetic gene, freeing eating from its reliance on the exploitations of land or labor: this is not quite a utopia, however, as economic collapse follows, while oral eating becomes a pleasure, even a perversion, reserved for the remaining wealthy elite; and laboratory produced flesh — a real possibility in the next several decades — might allow for carnivorous meals liberated both of the cruelty of slaughter, whether industrialized or “humane,” and of the associated steakhouse fantasies of masculine mastery over life and death (Ferdman 2015).

All of this suggests that a truly posthuman turn in food must await disruptive technological interventions into the practices of eating and food production. Meanwhile, the human remains, that species that habitually believes itself to be the one life meant properly to be just an end rather than means. A more thorough posthumanism should therefore concentrate neither on the eating itself, nor on trying to surmount our animal dependence on other bodies, but rather on resisting cultural practices of human supremacy. The posthuman eater need not await some technological tomorrow, as that posthuman possibility has always been here, wherever humans, particularly dominant humans, have recognized themselves as food too.

In a passage lauded by ecocritics for describing a “transhuman ethic” (Schalow 2007: 112), Martin Heidegger’s 1946 “Letter on Humanism” declares that “Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of being” (1998: 260). But to be a shepherd is to be singular and heroic among a crowd, the fortunate, often witless recipients of our protection; and to be a literal shepherd means not just protecting a flock, but living off wool and, at last, mutton. Heidegger’s metaphor, if it inspires charitable attention to suffering herbivores, has not gone far enough. “Man is the universal parasite” (24), observes Michel Serres; “all the footprints point towards the lion’s den” (26). But they lead this way only within the fantasy of human mastery, in which we are only the eaters, and never the meal.

By emending Heidegger’s maxim to read “man is the fodder of beings,” we recognize that however much we believe ourselves to exist within the clearing we make for being, we are also material things, and therefore subject to the uses of others. The authentic (post)human condition must recognize our inescapable material presence amid other material things. Increasing attention to the human microbiome — the mites that live exclusively on humans, the intestinal bacteria necessary for our digestion (Bennett 2010: 112; Yong 2015) — evidence a growing awareness that every individual human is a microcosmic homeland or pasture for swarms of other life, indifferent to our parochial illusion of solitude or self-mastery.

Some of the most thorough conceptualizations of the materiality of human bodies appear long before these modern microscopic insights, in the death poetry of medieval Christian Europe, which reveled in the decomposition, and hence the edibility, of human bodies. A work like the fifteenth-century “Disputation between the Body and Worms,” for example, pictures a crowd of worms insisting to a complaining corpse that she has always been

food for others: bedbugs, lice, and now, in the grave, maggots. It is not accidental that this poem, preserved in a document produced by an unusually severe male monastery, makes its beleaguered corpse a once beautiful, wealthy woman. Its celibate male readers would be led to recognize their own edibility, while simultaneously delighting in the humiliation of a fleshy vanity that they disdained as particularly feminine. And they themselves imagined that they would be resurrected into perfected, unchanging bodies, freed of the necessity of eating or the humiliations of excretion. Left behind is the pullulating body of this woman, like so many other disdained bodies, treated as food.

This poem is evidence that only a few humans have tended to be granted the full protections of human mastery. The Christians of late medieval England told stories about the descent of Jews from pigs, one of the few domestic animals raised only for meat; crusade fictions imagined captured Muslim soldiers butchered and fed either to each other or to their captors; eighteenth-century accounts of maritime cannibalism attest that white sailors were rarely the first sacrificed to stave off their shipmates' starvation; and what often distinguishes the heroes of postcollapse fiction like *The Road* or *World War Z* from the swarms of eaters and eaten, is their being, with few exceptions, well-armed, able-bodied white men.

Posthuman practices must counter the idea of the "uneaten eater," by requiring a recognition of the shared immanence of at least our bodies and their enabling, uneven interdependencies. A posthuman ethics of food would replace the concept of the "food pyramid" with a "food chain" or better yet, a food web. This would not aim to render us as ethically irrelevant as many of us tend to assume our food to be, but would rather dispel the interwoven illusions of innocent eating, material independence, and personal transcendence.

Patterns of consumption are never one-to-one (as with a chain), as anything that exists continually relies on the consumption of a host of others, and is subject in turn to other, uncountable appetites. Nor can eating, enacted as it is amid the continual flux of beings, ever be a closed loop. Eating is open-ended.

Several contemporary artistic practices center on fostering this recognition. Jae Rhim Lee's Infinity Burial Suit is crocheted with a rhizomatic pattern infused with mushroom spores, that when combined with mineral and fungal reagents, both helps the body decompose and captures the environmental toxins that we ingest while alive ("The Infinity Burial"). Elaine Tin Nyo is currently engaged in a "Little Piggy" project: she is raising five piglets, whose lives will end in an abattoir, whereupon Tin Nyo will render them into sausage. She has pared this project with one she plans to realize decades from now, when she meets her own (natural) death, by having herself also transformed into sausage (Moy 2014). A still more challenging posthuman food practice, neither awaiting death, nor relying on directly killing animals, is recorded in Alex Branch's 2011 video "Nothing Left to Take Away." Branch walks onto a parking lot hillock of snow, and kneels amid a swarm of seagulls, feeding them bread, until, empty handed, she takes on a fetal position to let the gulls peck frantically and angrily at the food that remains: this is her helmet, which Branch has fashioned from bread. Branch has not evened out the distinction between herself and the gulls: she is the artist, this is his work, and her gift to them is also a cultural practice for herself; she has not returned the world to a presumptive "balance": after all, the gulls fight with one another, and bread is the paradigmatic food of settled agriculture and its inequities; and to shoot the film, she had first to accustom the gulls to her presence: this is therefore a practice of mutual accommodation, which requires taking a

body from one home and training it for another. This practice is one of negotiation, dependency, shared exposure, and danger, without the fantasy of balance or of getting it perfectly right.

Food is the substance par excellence of nostalgic attachment to the maternal or even grand-maternal, the homeland, the “pure,” “authentic,” and “hand-crafted.” In these forms, food functions as a materialized form of fantasies of innocence and belonging and the irresponsibility of being taken care of. In their frequent dedication to disrupting notions of ontological fixedness, posthuman materialisms sometimes forget that anything that exists, whatever its entanglements with others, still has or is had by that one thing that cannot be shared, its own end, whether we call this end a disruption, a dispersal, or a death. Posthuman materialisms must recognize that one of the most common material affordances is being food, more and generally less willingly, for others. A posthuman awareness of eating recognizes it as a practice of bodily and hence ontological porosity; it knows that that eating is never innocent, always a death practice, always an always unequal exchange between mortal bodies, always a negotiation between bodies more or less fitted for each other, and that being a companion - as with Branch and the gulls - can sometimes require offering up what one believes to be one’s own body to another.